

THE INFLUENCE OF THE HEATH IN HARRY'S  
NOVELS AND OF THE PRAIRIE IN CATHER'S NOVELS:  
A COMPARISON

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has been so strong in the work of some men and women of letters that they have been called "local color writers." Certain localities have influenced these authors until they have made those sections of the country the background for their poetry and prose.

Sir Walter Scott is noted for his novels and poems of the Scottish Border. Joel Chandler Harris has made Uncle Remus and the Southland famous. James Lane Allen has drawn a picture of Kentucky. Mark Twain has made Mississippi River life familiar. Mary Wilkins Freeman characterizes New Englanders. Hamlin Garland pictures the Middle Border.

Thomas Hardy is known for his Wessex stories, which are colored by his intimate knowledge of southwestern England, known to the Anglo-Saxons as Wessex. But he does more than use local color. His stories grow out of the environment, and he shows how character and background can clash and how they can fuse.

Perhaps no author other than Thomas Hardy succeeded before the twentieth century in creating for his charac-

ters a background that determines so powerfully their emotions, reactions, and responses. But Willa Cather in the twentieth century is a rival to Hardy in the field of nature environment as an influence upon character. She utilizes nature in preparing the stage for the entrance of the players, and for her purpose she uses the plains and the prairies of Nebraska just as Hardy used the English heath and woodlands. It is the purpose, therefore, of this paper to compare the ways in which Hardy and Cather show respectively the influence of the heath and the prairie on the characters in their novels.

An intensive study of the Wessex novels with the heath as their backgrounds--"Far from the Madding Crows," "The Return of the Native," and "The Mayor of Casterbridge"--has shown that Thomas Hardy is a master of local color and that his ability to build character through environment is exceptional. Many of his other novels and his poetry show this ability in a lesser way. In addition to the works of Hardy, an extensive reading of excerpts from histories of English literature, criticisms by other writers, and articles in periodicals discussing Hardy and his work have substantiated this view.

The procedure followed in studying Willa Cather was

to make a study of "My Antonia," "O Pioneers," "One of Ours," and "A Lost Lady." These books have their settings on the prairies of Nebraska, and they show clearly the influence of the plains in frontier days. Other novels by Miss Cather have added to knowledge gained from these four about how she used nature as an influence on character. A small amount of additional information was procured from criticisms, histories of American literature, articles, and biographies. Since she is a contemporary writer, material is not abundant, and most of the conclusions drawn here concerning her work are original, proof for which was secured from her novels.

In a comparison of the two authors, one's attention is first drawn to the similarity of their early life as a training for the kind of writing they do. Hardy's architectural training taught him accuracy, conciseness, precision, and carefulness of detail. Cather's work as a newspaper writer required the same qualities. Both studied the Latin and Greek writers. Both lived in the region about which they wrote, and they knew intimately the types of people who are characters in their novels. Both experienced the same weather conditions, atmosphere, and natural phenomena that their characters experienced. Thus

the realism of both authors is exact and true.

The characters of both develop certain characteristics and attitudes because of their environment. The isolation of the heath and of the prairie fosters self-reliance and independence. Their loneliness makes them restrained and somewhat reticent except with people of their own groups. Their struggle for a livelihood develops industry, courage, and patience. Their inability to change their environment teaches them adaptability and resignation. Living close to nature breeds a love for nature and an acceptance of its moods. Nature becomes personified to them. It is a power, separate in their minds from God or fate, that influences men and women to do certain deeds, to think certain thoughts, to feel certain emotions. Both Hardy and Cather think that people who do not adapt themselves find only frustration and eventual failure.

Differences as well as similarities in the influence of the heath and the prairie are obvious. That Wessex is an old country and Nebraska a new one makes the situation somewhat different. Ancestors of the Wessex people have lived for generations on the heath and have absorbed its characteristics. The enervating climate has developed a people different in temperament from the robust, buoy-

ant-spirited farmers in Nebraska. They meet situations dissimilarly. Their characteristics, though similar, are formed in a different way. Yet, above everything else, stands out the conclusion that nature is the power on the heath and on the prairie that makes or crushes the inhabitants of those regions.

Hardy even divided his novels into three groups, so well did he realize their differences; novels of character and environment, romances and fantasies, and novels of ingenuity. Therein lies proof that he himself realized how strongly environmental factors influenced character in the works he classed in the first group; namely, "Far from the Madding Crowd," "The Return of the Native," "The Mayor of Casterbridge," and "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."

Cather's novels have also been divided into three groups: novels of the prairie people, novels of artists and scholars, and historical novels.<sup>1</sup> The first group, which should include "My Antonia," "O Pioneers," "One of Ours," and "A Lost Lady," shows Miss Cather's understanding of human society influenced by environment.

There is a difference in the intensity of feeling

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Walter Fuller, A History of American Letters. pp. 357-364.

between the two authors. Cather seems not to feel so deeply as Hardy that the laws of nature are ruthless and stern and that against them man is impotent. In "A Lost Lady" Mrs. Forrester is lost because she cannot adapt herself to the prairie. Yet the reader does not feel the ruthlessness of nature so much as he is impressed with the implacability and cruelty of the heath which makes Eustacia Vye in "The Return of the Native" a "lost lady" also.

The opinion of both writers, that nature is the cause of certain human developments and reactions, is supported by eminent psychologists. "Not God, but nature, acting through climate, determines the social system under which men live."<sup>2</sup>

It is an established fact that the natives of the tropical zone are indolent because the fibers of the body are relaxed. In cool climates men live vigorous outdoor lives and have an abundance of energy. Individual moods depend somewhat on weather conditions. Rainy, dreary days often cause despondency when there is no other reason for it. Pleasant days may bring hope and buoyancy.

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<sup>2</sup> La Piere, Richard T. and Farnsworth, Paul R., Social Psychology. p. 13.



"Every characteristic of man is due to the development of certain original material under certain environmental condition."<sup>3</sup> In fact, nature has a definite effect upon the emotions, thoughts, and actions of all human beings. That certain personality traits are modified or developed in some degree by circumstantial factors is emphasized in the novels of both Hardy and Cather. For example, patience is a dominant characteristic in those persons who live on or near Egdon Heath. It is especially notable in Tess of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," Elizabeth-Jane Henchard and Donald Farfrae of "The Mayor of Casterbridge," Giles Winterborne of "The Woodlanders," and Gabriel Oak of "Far from the Madding Crowd." The people who adapt themselves to the prairie country also develop patience to a marked degree, as evidenced by Antonia of "My Antonia," Alexandra in "O Pioneers," Ernest Havel in "One of Ours," and Father Latour in "Death Comes for the Archbishop."

Especially realistic are the stories of both writers, partly because of their authentic use of nature. This similarity in verisimilitude is due somewhat to the fact

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<sup>3</sup>Shaffer, Laurance Fredric, The Psychology of Adjustment. p. 345.

that both Hardy and Gather resemble each other in their preparation for writing; that is, their training and tendencies make them careful of detail.

#### THOMAS HARDY

Thomas Hardy was born just outside Dorchester in Bockhampton, Dorsetshire, England, June 2, 1840. His formal education was not very extensive, but it gave him the desire for further culture which later led him to study Latin and Greek and to read the plays of the great Greek dramatists. He availed himself while in London of the opportunity to enroll in evening courses at the University of London, and it is probable that it was here he began his intensive study of Shakespeare.

His father, a local builder, apprenticed him at the age of sixteen to an architect; and he learned to do careful and detailed sketching, measuring, and drawing. This training probably is the basis for the carefulness of structure and detail that Hardy shows in all his writing. A good architect would naturally desire precision, and Hardy carries that tendency into his writing even to the using of technical words and phrases.

# WESSEX

## Legend for the Map of Wessex

1. The heaths between Dorchester and Wareham are the setting of "The Return of the Native."
2. The "Weatherbury" of "Far from the Madding Crowd."
3. The "Lintcomb Ash" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," where Tess worked for a short period, was a farm nearby.
4. The "Sherston Abbas" of "The Woodlanders."
5. The "Little Winton" of "The Woodlanders."
6. The "Wellstock" of "Under the Greenwood Tree." Talbothays Dairy, where Tess met Angel, was a few miles away.
7. The "Exonbury" of the novels.
8. The "Emminster" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."
9. The "Port Brady" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "The Mayor of Casterbridge."
10. Dorchester, Thomas Hardy's birthplace. The "Casterbridge" of "The Mayor of Casterbridge." Boldwood in "Far from the Madding Crowd" was imprisoned here.
11. The "Bournemouth" of the novels.
12. The "Wellbridge House" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," where Tess and Angel stayed after their marriage, is the manor house, former seat of the D'Urbervilles.
13. The "Anglebury" of "The Return of the Native".
14. As "Greenhill" this is the scene of the fair in "Far from the Madding Crowd."
15. The "Kingsbere" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."
16. The "Chase" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."
17. "Parlot", Tess's home.
18. The "Middleton Abbey," where Mrs. Charmand lived during her intrigue with Dr. Fitzpiers.
19. The "Weydon-Priors," scene of the fair with which "The Mayor of Casterbridge" opens.
20. Stonehenge, where Tess was arrested.
21. The "Trantridge" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." Alec's home was nearby.
22. The "Chaseborough" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."
23. The "Sanbourne" of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," where Tess murdered Alec.
24. The "Wintoncester," where Tess was executed.

Numbers 1,2,6,10,12,13, and 15 are on or very near Epton Heath.

Map and legend from Priscoe, Sharp, and Forish, A Mapbook of English Literature. p. 25.



FIG. 1. Wessex, the Hardy Country.

Another reason for his accuracy of detail may be found in his many professional excursions that he made everywhere in southwestern England. In his study of various village churches he learned to know the people intimately and to steep himself in Wessex tradition.

His novels show the influence of the Greek dramatists whom he had studied in London, and the misfortune which dogs the steps of his characters is similar to that of the Greek tragedians. This tendency is often called pessimism in Hardy's works; yet critics disagree somewhat as to the reason for the feeling. Robert Smith thinks that Hardy "believes in a Deity...that created all men but has forgotten them, that people were made by mistake."<sup>4</sup>

The central problem of life to him was how to understand and accept the discrepancy between desire and destiny, between man's hope for himself and Nature's ruthless way with him, between personality and fate. The novels took for their background a nature beautiful but sinister and somewhat larger in scale than the people who lived their lives in its shadow.<sup>5</sup>

Those who knew Hardy personally say that he had a whimsical humor of which only those who knew him well were cognizant. He was modest, courteous, and kind, and he

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<sup>4</sup>Smith, Robert M., "Philosophy in Thomas Hardy's Poetry," North American Review. 220:330.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Hardy, "Nation." 126:84-85.

loved animals. He was a true nature lover; yet he thought that the dark side of life was prevalent and could not conscientiously be ignored. Too much laughter in a world too full of trouble was out of place. Surely no one can disagree with that thought who has felt the sorrow of those last lines in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" just before Tess's execution.

One of the pair was Angel Clare, the other ....'Liza Lu. Their pale faces seemed to have shrunk to half their natural size. They moved on hand in hand, and never spoke a word, the drooping of their heads being that of Giotto's "Two Apostles."

When they had nearly reached the top of the great West Hill, the clocks in the town struck eight. Each gave a start at the notes...., entered upon the turf, and impelled by a force which seemed to over-rule their will, suddenly stood still, turned and waited in paralyzed suspense behind the stone.

Upon the cornice of a tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck, something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

"Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess.<sup>6</sup>

Hardy does not feel nature to be the "mother" or "nurse" with kindly propensities as so many writers do. Rather the laws of nature are rigid and unrelenting, and

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<sup>6</sup> Hardy, Thomas, Tess of the D'Urbervilles. pp. 506-508.

man is powerless against them.

Mrs. Emily Hardy knew how her husband felt about nature, and in her biography of him she often quoted his own words indicating his attitude. She reports him as saying, "I sometimes look upon all things in inanimate Nature as pensive mutes."<sup>7</sup> He felt that the beauty of nature had been emphasized too much and its mystery not enough, that even in pictures beauty is not truth unless it includes the tragedy that is always present though sometimes half-hidden.

His seeming pessimism extends to humanity as well as to nature. He sees no "holy plan" in which such families as the Durbeyfields are given an over-supply of children who are sentenced to disaster because of their parents.

On the other hand, some critics feel that there is a humor that relieves the pessimism. The fact that Hardy's attitude is impersonal takes away the feeling of intentional sombreness that would indicate his pessimism.<sup>8</sup>

The tragic sadness of "The Return of the Native" is not surpassed in any other of his novels. The book could

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<sup>7</sup>Hardy, Florence Emily, The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, p. 150.

<sup>8</sup>Garstang, A. H., "The Humour of Thomas Hardy," Fortnightly Review, 129: 206.



have been named "The Tragedy of Eustacia Vye;" for Hardy has shown, as definitely as Shakespeare proved in "The Tragedy of Macbeth," that "the wages of sin is death". And the setting for those sins that are inevitable because of their background is that greatest character of all-- Egdon Heath.

Such an environment as Hardy describes in the opening chapter of "The Return of the Native" could have no scenes other than those which he presents silhouetted against the implacable, desolate heath. This passage is of unusual length, but it is a masterpiece of natural yet symbolic description. It indicates the tragedy that is to follow. The reader realizes that Egdon Heath is not just an open, level tract of waste land used as a setting for a story, but that it is one of the actors, mysterious but omnipresent.

A Saturday afternoon in November approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment...

The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the heath wore the appearance of an instalment of night which had taken up its place before the astronomical hour was come: darkness to a great extent had arrived thereon, while day stood distant in the sky...The face of the heath by its



mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of the moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread....

It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity....Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity. ...Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

The next paragraph indicates that Hardy felt that the effect of Egdon Heath was as strong upon the characters as one individual's influence upon another. In addition he makes one feel the immovable, gigantic personality of this actor, Egdon. The mills of the gods, or the will of Egdon Heath, grinds slowly those who fight against it. It seems here that Hawthorne might have interpolated his supernatural romanticism which is usual in any writing in which coincidence plays a large part. Or Shakespeare might have been setting the stage for the boot-clad actors.

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<sup>9</sup> Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. pp. 3-5.

The most thorough-going ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon: he was keeping within the line of legitimate indulgence when he laid himself open to influences such as these....Colours and beauties so far subdued were, at least, the birthright of all. Only in summer days of highest feather did its mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during the winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. Then it became the home of strange phantoms; and it was found to be the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster, and are never thought of after the dream till revived by scenes like this.<sup>10</sup>

Even in such an environment, in which we possibly might expect the characters of a lesser artist than Hardy to react differently, human beings have such qualities as independence, pride, restraint, resignation, dignity, adaptability, courage, self-reliance, curiosity, and industry which are theirs primarily because of the influence of their environment.

Hardy undoubtedly believed that human nature was the same anywhere; and, therefore, the universality of all emotions, from despair to ecstasy, is also local. Wessex is sufficient territory to show the truth of this belief.

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<sup>10</sup>Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. pp. 5-7.

The first few chapters of "The Return of the Native" include interesting and realistic pictures of the people of Egdon Heath. Their rustic manners, their dialect, their sociability around the bonfires furnish strong local color. Diggory Venn is first introduced to the reader as he is carrying Thomasin home in his van after the plans for her marriage are not completed. He is accompanied along the road by an old man. The two would remark about the state of the country and then lapse into silence. The procedure was usual on the heath, and Hardy remarks about it, "The silence conveyed to neither any sense of awkwardness; in these lonely places wayfarers, after a first greeting, frequently plod on for miles without speech."<sup>11</sup>

Curiosity, more prevalent probably in rural society than in urban but as common on the heath as on the prairie, showed itself in the old man's remarks: "You have a child there?....Why did she cry out? ...A young woman? ...A nice looking girl, no doubt?...I presume I might look in upon her?"<sup>12</sup>

Again, in "Far from the Madding Crowd" Gabriel Oaks watches Bathsheba and her aunt care for the sick cow be-

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<sup>11</sup>Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. p. 10.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

cause he has seen a light through the crevices of the roof and is curious about them. He watches Bathsheba ride man-style without her knowledge because he is interested in her and very curious as to what she may do.

Possibly that same spirit of curiosity is more quickly changed to sympathy and helpfulness among the rustics than among the city dwellers. The latter are so often busy with their own interests that they have no time for their neighbors. Not so with the heath dwellers. When Bathsheba will not pay the toll-gate keeper, Gabriel pays the two pence required for her to pass. Again and again, he comes to her aid: the restoration of her lost hat, the saving of the ricks in the storm, the curing of the sheep.

A man less generous hearted than Gabriel might have left her to her troubles, but not he. Living all his life on the heath, he shows the influence of it upon his own character: its huge size gave no chance for littleness in a human being; its lonesomeness made him value friendship and contact with men and women; its acceptance of destruction and sorrow made him desirous of averting those very things. His firmness seems a direct gift of the heath. When he felt that people were not being true to themselves, he never hesitated to point out to them their error, if it

in any way affected him. It is not to be construed that he would thrust his opinions upon others. Far from it. He was as reticent as most heath inhabitants unless the moment called for words.

Dignity is strong in such characters as Venn, Oak, Boldwood, and Winterbourne. Farmer Boldwood stands with the men at the corn market, but he shows no attention to a woman in business, as unusual as it is. This obliviousness to her presence piques Bathsheba more than his interest might have done, and she notices his gentlemanly manner and quiet demeanor.

Gabriel Oak, "one of the quietest and most gentle men on earth," humane, patient, energetic, and industrious, maintains his dignity of manner whether his fortunes are low or high. In good fortune as Farmer Oak he is no more commendable a person than when circumstances change for the worse and he must return to sheep herding for a livelihood.

About Eustacia, Hardy says that opportunity had been denied her of learning to be undignified, for she lived a lonely life.

Those whose lives are really satisfactory to themselves are the humble folk of the heath. They work but

they do not slave. They live in much the same way their fathers and grandfathers did, taking life docilely as it comes, without agitation or worry. In some cases the problem of livelihood is comparatively acute as in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude the Obscure." On the whole, their pleasures and desires are simple, and they have learned that it is more natural to do without than to have.

These folk are usually hardy and merry. Much of Hardy's humor is most delightful when it uses for its aim such people as Mark Clark, Billy Smallbury, and Jan Coogan, who belong to that class which "casts its thoughts into the form of feeling, and its feelings into the form of commotion." Most enjoyable are Grandfer Cantle, whose ability to sing must not be challenged; Christian, who cannot get a wife; and Laban Tall, who is overly blessed with one. Wessex is indeed peopled by a picturesque and human stock.

Superstition is a very real element in the lives of the Wessex people. "No moon, no man," believes Christian Cantle. Tess's friends think, "Better wed over the dikes than over the moor." Mrs. Durbeyfield fears for "The Compleat Fortune Teller" to remain in the house over night; yet she believes its prophecies. When Tess's chin is pricked by a

rose thorn, she feels it is an ill-omen; for, says Hardy, "Tess was steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions." Most fetishistic of all is the belief of Susan Nunsuch that burning a wax effigy of Eustacia will break Eustacia's wicked spell.

The greatest antithesis in the Hardy novels is the difference between characters who love the heath and live happy, normal lives on it, and those who have experienced the world outside and are restless and discontented near the heath. Of the former, Clym Yeobright illustrates how one who loves the heath and yet has lived elsewhere is tied to it and returns with expectations of spending a long life with the heath people.

Clym was born on Egdon Heath and grew to manhood there. His toys were the flint knives, arrow-heads, stones, and flowers from the heath. He knew it perfectly, every path, every scene, every substance of it. To Eustacia he says that the heath is most exhilarating, strengthening, and soothing to him and that he would rather live there than anywhere else in the world. Its open stretches, its loneliness, even its fern and furze are dear to Clym.

On the contrary, Eustacia thinks that it is a tragedy to be required to live on the heath. She spent her child-



hood at Budmouth, but circumstances forced her to Egdon. The gay life of Budmouth she contrasts with the seclusion of the heath, and her dislike of the grim and sombre masses only magnifies her unhappiness. Except in the purple season, she can hardly endure the heath, and she says that it is a cruel taskmaster to her.

The heath had four seasons: the period when the fern was young and green; the flowering or purple season, as Eustacia called it; the brown season; and the dark winter time.

Wildeve, too, feels the discontent that Eustacia experiences. He has been an engineer until shortly before the story opens. Then he inherits the Quiet Woman Inn, and because of financial necessity, he comes to Wessex. He is not satisfied, however, and by some whim of temperament he always desires something until he has it; then it loses its value. When Thomasin promises to marry him and her aunt objects, he works to overrule the aunt. When he has her consent and can marry Thomasin, he wants Eustacia. When Eustacia agrees to his proposal, he prefers Thomasin. When he is married to Thomasin, he wants Eustacia.

Passion, selfishness, desire, or at least some inability to accept circumstances, as the true heath lover does,



brings only disaster and suffering to those who pit their will against natural laws. Eustacia and Wildeve are drowned. Troy is shot. Henchard dies old and forgotten. Alec D'Urberville is stabbed. Boldwood is hanged. Their lives are apparently broken because they will to realize certain ambitions instead of adapting themselves to circumstances. It is only such people as Venn and Oak, who forget themselves in unselfish and patient guardianship of those they love, who reap the reward.

As for most of the women, they seem to be controlled by fate, and so feminine characters who do not adapt themselves to their environment usually pay in unhappiness, misery or death for one short moment of failure to follow convention. They have no chance against the coincidences arranged to catch them and give them unhappiness.

Poor Tess spends years of sorrow because she is a victim of circumstances, seemingly through no fault of hers except that of being a woman. Even a fitting setting is provided for her undoing; the Chase, the oldest wood in England, of almost primeval date, with the addition of webs of vapor, fog, and mist, and the chill of a September night. Chance seems to have arranged everything to work against Tess.

Chance alone could have set the gargoyle in such a position that the rain water would rush into Fannie's grave and wash away all the flowers Troy had so painstakingly planted there. The death of Oak's sheep in their rush over the cliff, Troy's untimely reappearance, Tess's sight of Alec as a preacher--all are purely coincidental; yet that very irony of circumstance plus temperament so often makes or breaks a life.

Bathsheba is allowed her fun longer than most of Hardy's women characters, and she even finds happiness in the end. Like Thomasin, she loves the out-of-doors and does not find nature at war with her temperament. Thomasin loves the heath, is contented there, and accepts what life brings her with hardly a murmur. Bathsheba is a more vivid character, a self-reliant, handsome woman who likes her farm and the duties of ownership. Perhaps she is saved much suffering because she makes no attempt to control circumstance. She is honest. When Boldwood asks her if she can deny that her answer would have been yes if Troy had not courted her, she candidly answers, "I cannot." She is independent, yet generous and often gracious. She has the virtue of modesty that nearly all of Hardy's characters have. He says that she has "the instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do in

towns."

Uncomplaining Grace Melbury is thrust here and there as fate decrees. Marty, resigned and restrained, is a tragedy of unrequited love, tossed about by some omnipotent power. Elizabeth-Jane is another example of the futility of women in the pattern of life. Her patience and restraint equal that of the other feminine characters and may possibly even surpass them. Proud Eustacia has hardly a chance, plotted against as she is by circumstance, by environment, and by her own nature. Hardy admits that the effect of the heath upon a woman would be to make her a poet if she is a contented woman, a devotee if she is a suffering woman, a psalmist if she is a pious woman, even a giddy woman thoughtful and a rebellious woman saturnine.

One feels that the women are always struggling ineffectually against natural forces. Hardy sees to it that their environment is fitted to the pathos of the situation. There is a feeling in all the novels with the exception of "Under the Greenwood Tree," in which the atmosphere seems sunny, that there are no blue skies, only gray skies, cloudy and threatening. This is true of the novels of rural life, especially those pervaded by the spirit of Egdon Heath.

Hardy's powers of observation are always noticeable, but especially does he see the characteristics of the people of Wessex in their facial expressions. Philosophically does he remark that masculine eyes seem to have a tickling effect upon virgin faces in rural districts. About the girls at the club walking, he says, "A difficulty in arranging their lips in this crude exposure to public scrutiny, and inability to balance their heads and to disassociate self-consciousness from their features, were apparent in them, and showed that they were genuine country girls, unaccustomed to many eyes."<sup>13</sup>

Religion in the minds of Hardy's women characters has a peculiar interpretation. To Eustacia "a wet day was the expression of irremedial grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not classify definitely as the God of her childhood."<sup>14</sup> The instincts of the women who live much out-of-doors seem to be almost pagan.

Even when no human element enters the picture, Hardy sees the cruelty in nature itself. When a storm sweeps over Egdon, the trees suffer "amputations, bruises, cripplings, and harsh lacerations" from the high wind. These

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<sup>13</sup>Hardy, Thomas, Tess of the D'Urbervilles. p. 9.

<sup>14</sup>Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. p. 94.

would leave scars throughout the life of the trees. The heath is the one thing not affected by the storm. The wind merely waves the furze, and it truly seems "that Egdon was made for times like these."

The Vale of Blackmoor has its grey skies just as the heath has. It seems almost as if they presage an electric storm. In bad weather the paths become tortuous and miry, but in good weather it is a lovely place--hills and dales, broad rich masses of grass, trees which were once part of the forest of White Hart. It is the languorous atmosphere that gives one the feeling of lightning and thunder in the air.

In contrast, the Valley of the Great Dairies, with its clear and invigorating air and its swiftly flowing rivers, seems a fit setting for happiness. It is there Tess meets Angel, and their ecstatic days of acquaintanceship and courtship take place. Her trip to the dairies from her home and the time she spends in walking or riding over the country afford opportunity for some of the best descriptions of rural scenes in the book. The drive toward the railway station which Tess and Clare take is an example of the skill with which Hardy suggests the effect of the atmosphere upon the characters. The diminishing daylight, the

long gray miles, the swarthy slopes of the heath, the driving rain is the setting for Tess's attempt to tell Angel about her misfortune, made difficult by her own sense of disgrace and her fear of losing him.

Nearly all characters show the influence of the heath upon their personality, disposition, and temperament. They seem to belong particularly to the heath. They are usually narrow, simple, primitive, superstitious, and half-articulate, waging continuously an uneven struggle with physical nature and natural laws, and the relationship which exists among the three results in sombre realism. This kinship between man and nature is pronounced in all the environmental novels of Hardy.

#### WILLA CATHER

Kinship of nature with man is the predominant feature in the novels of Willa Cather as it is in the novels of Thomas Hardy. The plains color the lives of the people who live upon them as the heath colors the lives of the Wessex people who live on or near the heath.

In "My Antonia," "O Pioneers," "One of Ours," "A Lost Lady," "The Song of the Lark," and "Death Comes for the

Archbishop," the wide expanse of prairie in mid-western United States is the setting for human dramas almost as intense as those of Egdon Heath. In place of the sinister, inflexible heath, Miss Cather uses the changing and growing prairie, just as inexorable in its demands as the heath, just as merciless and cruel to those who are unable to adapt themselves, but without the morbid, malevolent spirit. All the leading characters in the Cather novels feel the demands of the prairie, and most of them realize the necessity of complying with them.

The training that Willa Cather received fitted her for the exactness and detail with which her novels abound, just as Hardy's architectural experience and classical knowledge influenced his work.

Miss Cather was born on a farm in Virginia and lived there until she was eight years old. Her father brought the family to a farm near Red Cloud, Nebraska, and Miss Cather lived there until she started to high school in Red Cloud.

Since most of the country was still unbroken prairie, it was used primarily for open grazing land. The country around Red Cloud was peopled largely by Scandinavians, Bohemians, Russians, and French Canadians. Since foreigners



## NEBRASKA

(Legend for the map of Nebraska)

1. Red Cloud, home of Willa Cather and probable "Black Hawk" of "My Antonia."
2. Hastings, about seventy miles northeast of the Wheeler farm in "One of Ours."
3. Prague, a Bohemian settlement.
4. Omaha, mentioned in the novels.
5. Lincoln, where Claude of "One of Ours" attended college, first at a denominational college, then at the state university. Miss Cather was graduated from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.
6. Milver, mentioned as a neighboring town in the novels.
7. Brownville, the ferry where most of the pioneers crossed the Missouri River.
8. Sweet Water, the setting for "A Lost Lady."
9. Hanover, mentioned in "O Pioneers." The Bergson boys cut wood on the banks of the Blue River near here.

Map from Rand McNally and Company, Literary Atlas of the World. Vol. I. United States. p. 256.



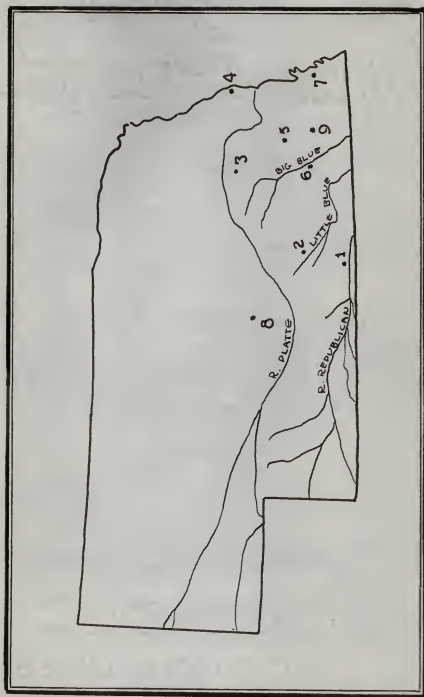


Fig. 2. Map of Nebraska.

were Miss Cather's neighbors, it is not difficult to understand why she is capable of writing so ably and authentically about them. She has pictured perfectly the Bohemians in "My Antonia" and the Swedes in "The Song of the Lark" and "O Pioneers." She found these people very interesting; and since there were no schools for her to go to, she rode her pony around the country and became intimately acquainted with the families and their customs.

These people found the New World a scene of struggle: a struggle to learn the language, to conquer the soil, to own property, to accept the calamities--the prairie fires, the drouths, the hail, the blizzards--and to try again and again to get ahead.

Miss Cather read many English classics and learned Latin while she lived on the farm. Later, she attended the University of Nebraska after her graduation from the Red Cloud high school.

She taught school at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and did newspaper work, all the time experimenting and learning to write fiction. Every summer she returned to the plains country and lived in Nebraska, Wyoming, and Colorado. The prairies seemed to be her "grand passion."

Of her first year spent in Europe, she said:

I hung around the wheat country in central France...until it occurred to me that if I went home to my own wheat country, I might be less lachrymose. It's a queer thing about the flat country--it takes hold of you or it leaves you perfectly cold...I admire all kinds of country ...but when I strike the open plains, something happens, I'm home...That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea--it's <sup>the</sup> grand passion of my life...it's incurable.<sup>15</sup>

Miss Cather's background has influenced her writing just as surely as Hardy's influenced his. Her classical education was somewhat similar to his. Her newspaper writing and magazine editing also demanded accuracy and detail. Much documentation was necessary in many of her novels, especially in "Death Comes for the Archbishop," and she has documented precisely and truthfully.

In the prairie novels especially, Miss Cather has clearly shown her kinship to Hardy in her opinion of nature. She indicates that nature is stern and ruthless. There is no human defense against storms, snows, floods, and dust, that visit the prairies. Human needs do not govern nature. Nature takes its toll in suffering and disaster, and man's efforts are worth nothing against it.

"My Antonia" shows, possibly more than any other of

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<sup>15</sup>"Willa Cather, a Biographical Sketch," Willa Cather (anonymous collection of criticisms). p. 3.

Miss Cather's novels, how truly the fusion of character and background can take place. The story is made up of the clash between the two and their final welding together. In nearly all of her novels the most interesting characters are those on whom the country has the most influence. They are the ones who have strength, honesty, and sensitiveness, whether they succumb to their environment or conquer it. Old Mr. Shimerda, Professor Wunch, Marien Forrester, and Claude Wheeler are none the less memorable because they fail to dominate their environment and are defeated; yet one sympathizes most with Antonia, Alexandra, and Father Latour in their victory.

Antonia seems to symbolize the spirit of the plains from the time she arrives in Nebraska from Bohemia, unable to understand the language but sensitive to friendliness and to the immensity of the new country, to the time when Miss Cather leaves her happy with her farm and her twelve children.

This symbolism is expressed by Jim Burden who is supposedly telling the story as it occurred. Jim loved the great Middle-West through which the western railway company he served as legal counsel ran its main roads and branches. He often had to take trips through the country, and the

plains always reminded him of Antonia, the Bohemian girl with whom, as a child, he had played and worked on the Nebraska prairies. She seemed to mean to him "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood."

Jim's first Nebraska night might have been Miss Cather's since she came to Nebraska from Virginia, just as Jim did, at about the same age. Jim felt that:

There was nothing but land: not a country at all but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land--slightly undulating...I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it...Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.<sup>16</sup>

This feeling of Jim's, that he was blotted out, is significant of the power the prairie wields over the lives of the pioneers. It did obliterate Antonia's father as effectively as if it had pulled the trigger instead of letting him do it. Jim felt the personification of the country again in the daylight. The great expanses of shaggy, red grass as tall as he, which covered the Nebraska prairies before the advent of the plow, seemed full of motion, as if the whole country were running. Alexandra

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<sup>16</sup>Cather, Willa, My Antonia. p. 8.

had that same feeling in "O Pioneers" when she thought that she could feel the future stirring under the rough ridges. Jim described it in his little-boy way as if "the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping."

Antonia was a very pretty little girl with big, warm bright eyes and a rich dark glow in her cheeks. These two features were characteristically Antonia's, and even in middle age she still had them. She had a strong independent nature, liked children, animals, music, and the earth, disliked conceited people and helped the unfortunate, was usually merry and good-natured, and had a strong relish for life.

Antonia's transition from an old country to a new one made her observant and receptive to the life about her. She learned much from the wild sod--that it takes unbreakable physical strength to break it and make it produce. Antonia was naturally strong, and her work in the fields and the house increased her strength until, when she was grown, she could do as much work as a man. She was able to do a man's work without regret because she had learned adaptability. She realized that in order to secure comfort and necessities, certain methods must be followed; and

if securing them meant forgetting self and sacrificing femininity, she was willing.

Sometimes it must have taken indomitable courage to go to the fields to work. When she was carrying her first child, knowing the ostracism that would necessarily be her lot because of the child's illegitimacy, she worked in the harvest fields and herded cattle as long as she had strength. Bravely, quietly, and unostentatiously, she went among others, erasing herself whenever she could. Those who knew Antonia and her nobility of character thought no less of her, for they realized that through the lying, deception, and desertion of Larry Donovan she had been brought to her present condition.

Self-reliance and industry had early been taught her by the country. The Shimerdas had little to do with during their first winter in Nebraska. The crowded dugout where they lived, the loss of their money slowly taken from them bit by bit by the wily Krajelek, their starving condition--all demanded the height of patience and courage.

The winters on the open prairies were bitter ones, and the people and animals suffered. It was just after the big blizzard which came on Jim's birthday that Mr. Shimerda shot himself. The snow had "simply spilled from heaven,



like thousand of feather-beds being emptied." The men could not reach the barns to care for the cattle, and after the storm's abatement the path they shoveled was merely a tunnel through high walls of snow. The roads were so blocked that a wagon could not be got through to the Shimerda's until the road could be opened. The grave had to be dug by chopping out the frozen ground with axes. It was a dismaying situation, and people with less perseverance might have left the country as soon as they could.

The next summer found the circumstances of the Shimerdas much improved. They had planted a garden and bought a cow. Ambrosch was building a wooden house for them, and they had planted wheat and corn. Miss Cather gives a masterly description of the country then.

July came on with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odored cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green.<sup>17</sup>

Impressionable as Antonia was when she came to Nebraska, the prairie had a great influence upon her life and character. The hard work she had learned made her dependable and responsible. The wide open spaces gave her an openness of nature, made her gay, responsive, and cheerful.

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<sup>17</sup>Cather, Willa, My Antonia. p. 156.



She took on some of the characteristics of the soil. Her independent spirit was like the spirit of the prairie that was hard to subdue. It seems fitting that Antonia, who lived all her life from childhood up on the rich, productive prairie, should be the mother of twelve, happy, healthy, normal children.

Although Miss Cather loves the prairie and the open country, she seems to dislike the small town or country village. She does not satirize or ridicule it as Sinclair Lewis does, but she emphasizes that the small town is not very praise-worthy.

They (the village houses) were flimsy shelters, most of them poorly built of light wood, with spindle porch-posts horribly mutilated by the turning-lathe. Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to be made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip...People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed.<sup>18</sup>

The people who lived in these houses, unless they had once lived on the farm, were as Miss Cather indicates. The Wick Cutters are the best example in the book of repressed, quarrelsome, jealous, unhappy people. But the story does not use the town of Black Hawk for its back-

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<sup>18</sup> Cather, Wills, My Antonia. p. 250.

ground though the town is sometimes the setting. In the following quotation one feels the melancholy and bitterness of the people as well as of the weather.

Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one house from another in summer...The town looked bleak and desolate to me. The cold, pale light of the winter sunset did not beautify--it was like the light of truth itself...The wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said, "This is reality whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth."<sup>19</sup>

Symbolism and verisimilitude are mixed artistically in the novels. One incident in "My Antonia" is especially significant. As Jim and the girls watch the sunset, they see a curious thing. Just as the lower edge of the sun touches the horizon, a great black figure of a plow stands out silhouetted against it, magnified by the light until it is exactly contained within the circle. The group of watchers realize that it is a plow left on an upland farm when the farmer stopped his work and went home for the night, but Miss Cather says, "There it was, heroic in size, a picture-writing on the sun."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Cather, Willa, My Antonia. pp. 197, 198.  
<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 279.

And indeed, it turns out to be a "writing on the sun", for when Jim returns twenty years later, he finds wooden houses instead of sod, great fields of wheat and corn, orchards, big red barns, steam threshing machines, contented women. "All the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility."<sup>21</sup>

From the standpoint of style, creation of character, harmony of subject and setting, "One of Ours" is superior to "My Antonia." It, too, indicates Miss Cather's belief that nature molds people's characters.

A note of pessimism creeps in occasionally especially in the character of Claude Wheeler. To him, successful farming seemed just a vicious circle. Farmers raised and took to market products with an intrinsic value, and in return they received a poor quality of manufactured articles that went to pieces. Again, when the farmers thoughtlessly cut the trees, Miss Cather says, "With prosperity came a kind of callousness." In the days of the pioneer farmers were all friendly; later there were jealousies, arguments, and law suits.

Like Mrs. Forrester in "A Lost Lady," Dr. Archie in "The Song of the Lark," and Carl in "O Pioneers," Claude

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<sup>21</sup> Cather, Willa, My Antonia. p. 346.

was not adaptable. His father, Nat Wheeler, had run away from home into a new country. He had been restless, as Claude was restless; but he had found his niche on the prairie.

Claude was always discontented. Everything that did not go right seemed monumental to him. Miss Cather draws a perfect character picture of Claude when she says that he needs some one to admire, that he is convinced that the people who might mean something to him will always misjudge him and pass him by, that he is not afraid of loneliness but of accepting cheap substitutes, of easy compromises, of being fooled.

Claude had not learned patience from the prairies. He "jumped" at everything as if her were "a-beating carpets," as Dan said. He rushed into the farm work; he hurried to enlist; he worked furiously to finish his new house. His energy, instead of accomplishing anything, was spent in resisting unalterable conditions. He thought there must be something splendid about life if he knew where and how to find it.

Mr. Wheeler thought him visionary, always making difficulties. He called Claude's inability to adapt himself to the ways of the prairie and to the people "false pride."

Claude himself realized that everything he touched had always gone wrong under his hand.

He could not see the use of working for money when money did not bring the things he wanted. To all of his neighbors money meant security, but he felt that security killed the best and developed the worst qualities in people.

The happiest time in Claude's life was after he joined the army. Life took on a purpose in his eyes. Things happened; there was adventure, fulfillment. Yet his absence from the prairie country made him realize how much it really held him. It had seemed small and dull to him when he had to live there; but when he returned on leave after his enlistment and saw it with a new perspective, it seemed rich and large. The golden grain in all its abundance that meant wheat and flour and bread for soldiers and hungry people, the beautiful rolling prairies, Lovely Creek, all of it took on a new significance and meant more to him than it ever had before.

Ernest Havel is not so well drawn as Claude, but he is a thumb-nail sketch of the true plains man. He believed farming the best life in the world. He was a thinker, had mental liberty above most of his associates, yet loved the

work of the farm.

After "One of Ours," "The Professor's House" is somewhat of a disappointment. The plot is slender, not very compact, and the interest shifts from the professor's story to Tom Outland's story. The Outland plot gives Miss Cather an opportunity to exhibit her knowledge of the New Mexico plains, mountains, mesas, and canyons. She gives an inkling of their colorful appearance, their grandeur, and their gigantic size, but it is in "Death Comes for the Archbishop" that she has consummately drawn the Southwest.

When he was a young man, Tom had work with a cattle company, riding the range in New Mexico near the Blue Mesa. This mesa had a peculiar effect upon Tom. According to natives the huge mesa had never been climbed; it was impassable. It became an overwhelming passion with Tom to climb the mesa, and his story deals with his effort and his success. Miss Cather's description of the mesa is reminiscent of Hardy's heath.

Black thunder storms used to roll up from behind and pounce on us like a panther without warning. The lightning would play round it and jab into it so that you were always expecting it would fire the brush...After the burst in the sky was over, the mesa went on sounding like a drum, and seemed itself to be muttering and making noises.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Cather, Willa, The Professor's House. p. 193.

When one is alone, he has an opportunity to think much, to feel things more deeply, to acquire a sensitiveness to surroundings. Tom spent long hours each day on the range alone, thinking about the mesa, allowing the atmosphere and the country to influence him.

Tom's sense of observation and his love of beauty are shown in his diary when he makes such remarks as:

The rays of the sunlight fell slantingly through the little twisted pinions,--the light was all in between them as red as daylight fire, they fairly swam in it. Once again I had that glorious feeling that I've never had anywhere else, the feeling of being on the mesa, in a world above the world. And the air...soft, tingling, gold, hot with an edge of chill to it, full of the smell of pinions--it was like breathing the sun, breathing the color of the sky.<sup>23</sup>

The influence of the mesa was strongest during Tom's last summer there. His understanding seemed to grow. He was more able to coordinate and simplify. The mesa became a religious emotion to him, all very real.

The period in the professor's life which seemed the most real to him was the time he spent as a youth near the lake and later on a farm in Kansas. The boy was a primitive, interested and happy only in the earth, woods, water, sun, rain, and the sprouting and decaying of life. No ex-

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<sup>23</sup> Cather, Willa, The Professor's House. p. 240.



perience had occurred throughout his life that ever had quite the thrill or the nearness of his youth.

It seems that the influence of the prairie country, felt when the individual is in the impressionable stage, remains with him always. The fact is true of Thea in "The Song of the Lark." No matter how far she progresses along the road to fame or how great the distance she traveled from the plains and desert of her home, their influence was always present. Her personality came from her environment.

The cold on top of the great flat plain on the mountain ridge that Thea, Ray, and the Tallemantezes visited one September day was synonymous with Thea's coldness to the world in general. The wind that always blew night and day over those plains seemed like Thea's unquenchable ambition. Her sensitiveness to the atmosphere and to the traditions of the country came out on her visit there that day. She felt the stirring of the past and the future that meant progress for the plains country. She always remembered the windy ledge and the spirit of courage that seemed to live on it and in the old wagon tracks that the first comers had made.

She had a recurrence of that feeling when she was

going back to Moonstone, Colorado, for her summer vacation. As she stood on the observation platform while the train was crossing the Platte River, she felt that the plains were her own land.

The earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man's pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang--and one's heart sang there, too.... It was somehow an honest country, and there was a new song in that blue air which had never been sung in the world before. It was hard to tell about it, for it had nothing to do with words; it was like the light of the desert at noon, or the smell of the sagebrush after rain; intangible but powerful. She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship somehow was going to strengthen her; a naive, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted childlike power to love.<sup>24</sup>

Thea becomes the greatest artist of any of the characters in the plains novels. Although she is not a pioneer in the same sense as are the main characters in many of the books, there is a similarity between the artists and the pioneers, according to Carl Van Doren.

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<sup>24</sup> Cather, Willa, The Song of the Lark. pp. 219, 220.

Both of them are practically equals in single-mindedness; at least they work much by themselves, contending with definite though ruthless obstacles, and looking forward, if they win, to a freedom which cannot be achieved in the routine of crowded communities.<sup>25</sup>

"The Song of the Lark" may seem at first only a story of a girl who became a diva, but it is more than that. It is really a record of every great artist who struggles ahead toward some goal and fights to gain that goal.

In some ways Thea is comparable to the masterly-drawn Alexandra and Antonia. Born in the little desert town of Moonstone, Colorado, she has absorbed the characteristics of the country. To old Herr Wunch, her music teacher, she seemed like the prickly pear blossoms, thornier and sturdier, not sweet but wonderful.

She had the imagination and unfaltering ambition that characterized Alexandra but from a self-centered, cold, and selfish standpoint. It was this imagination that pointed for her the way to a career and fame, but it was her dogged industry, different from the free and easy manner of the desert people but similar to that of the plains people, that finally secured her the place she wanted.

One lovable characteristic of "the hired girls" in

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<sup>25</sup>Van Doren, Carl, Contemporary American Novelists. pp. 116, 117.

"My Antonia" was their joy in helping others. To give their sisters a new winter coat, their fathers a new plow, their mothers a new house, was their desire. But not so with Thea. She shut others out from her life unless they had the power to help her. She put her artistry forward; nothing else mattered. She lacked tact, could not reach people in a friendly way, antagonized many, and had little sense of humor. Yet she could be jovial and receptive under a pleasant stimulus.

Robert McNamara might have been talking about Thea when he says that people who live on the prairie have an inherent love for it although that love may become obscured. He states:

The vast beauty of the American westlands and their conquest should naturally inspire all who appreciate it to justify their lives by it and to give their existence some of its indestructible significance....All who live in it have some of it within them, an inherent love for it, though that love may be obscured and sometimes even obliterated. It is only through its obliteration that evil comes about.<sup>26</sup>

For those whose temperament is in conflict with their environment, the gambling spirit, which is noticeable in the farmer, seems to be absent, or present but in a small

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<sup>26</sup> McNamara, Robert, "Phases of American Religion in Thornton Wilder and Willa Cather," Catholic World 135: 646.

degrees. Dr. Archie in "The Song of the Lark" differs from Alexandra, who has the true gambler's spirit to take a chance no matter how great. He says, "We're all a lot of gamblers, without much nerve, playing for small stakes." He realized that he lacked the ability to adapt himself to his environment. "What the deuce are we here for anysay," he says. "It isn't as if we'd been born here."<sup>27</sup>

There is a courage prevalent among the farmers of the Middle-West that is not exactly duplicated anywhere else. Families prosper one year, three years, seven years; then come hard times. Drouth, hail, grasshoppers---a dozen different calamities can happen year after year, bringing failure and despair.

Go into any section of the plains country which depends upon agriculture, and you will find conditions similar in a way to those of the pioneer days. The present day "dust bowl" farmers have had to make the same decision the pioneers did: shall we leave and find a new home, or shall we stay and try again? Many have lost hope and gone away, leaving large tracts of untilled ground; but there are more who have remained and are struggling on, courageously believing in the country, putting in crops, hoping, praying.

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<sup>27</sup> Cather, Willa, The Song of the Lark. p. 181.

Similar was the situation for John Bergson's family in "O Pioneers." For three years after the father's death, his family, with Alexandra as its head, planned and prospered. Then came the drouth and the resulting crop failures. It was not difficult for the Bergson boys to be courageous for one season; but when hard times continued over three years, they lost hope and would have left had it not been for Alexandra's foresight and tenacity of purpose.

The true mid-western farmer has imagination. Alexandra, Antonia, and Thea could all claim that characteristic. Alexandra saw the expanses of wheat fields, green like the sea, then golden--iles of them. She saw fields of waving corn that meant wealth. She smelled the hay fields. She imagined huge corrals for pigs, horses, and cattle. All these things, she knew, would come to those who had patience, courage, industry, and love of the land. And the Bergsons had all that because of Alexandra's foresight.

But it was Alexandra who really succeeded. Oh, yes, her brothers shared her prosperity, but they were really "little" men. They saw only the money that came through their efforts. Alexandra could feel the vibrant quality of the land, its growing, its greatness. She noted that

the air was usually so clear that one could watch a hawk far up in the sky, that on a summer night nature seemed to be breathing deeply and preparing for another day, that roads had a way of disappearing over the rim of the prairie.

She realized Carl's inability to cope with prairie life. He was never very cheerful, and the bitter years of failure left him despondent. He hated the herd life of a farmer but thought he could be a success as an artist. He is another example of failure because of lack of adaptability.

Even Alexandra had her moods of near-despondency. Her vision of what could be, sustained her through those times; yet then her beloved prairies took on a forboding appearance similar to the heath. The country appeared empty and mournful, and the cattle lowed and bellowed. It was a fit setting for the moodiness of Lou and Oscar and the discouragement of Carl and his father.

Faith in the upland held Alexandra to her purpose of buying more land and struggling to make it pay. After her trip to the river farms, she was more convinced than ever that her destiny must be on her father's land. About the people on the river farms, Alexandra said:



There are a few fine farms...most of the land is rough and hilly. They can always scrape along down there, but they can never do anything big. Down there they have a little certainty, but up with us there is a big chance.<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Bergson felt the same way. He, too, was looking for his "chance" just as farmers on the plains do today. They take a "gambler's chance" when they plant crop after crop only to see it fail, yet knowing that the law of averages will eventually give them a big crop. One or two good years they know will pay them back for the years of failures.

Alexandra, more than any woman character in Miss Cather's novels other than Antonia, developed certain characteristics because of her love for the land. Carl thought that she seemed a part of it, that "she looked as if she had walked straight out of the morning itself."

Alexandra's patience, her imagination, her love of nature and her faith in it developed through the influence of environment upon temperament. Her foresight and imagination pointed the way for her, but it was the resistance of the land that developed her patience and resourcefulness. Every argument that her brothers advanced for leaving the farm she met convincingly. Patiently she planned

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<sup>28</sup>Cather, Willa, O Pioneers. p. 64.

and worked to pay off the mortgages she had courageously placed on their farm to buy more land. For every problem she found a solution. Sometimes she used the trial and error method; but more often she watched intelligent, shrewd people and did not follow the crowd as Lou and Oscar wished..

The reader feels that Miss Cather has treated Thea, Alexandra, and Antonia subjectively, and she has sacrificed nothing by so doing. Although Nebraska seems to be her natural background, the Southwest is almost as real, but she treats it in an objective way. The pictures she paints of New Mexico and the Indians are like a mural high up on a wall--real but not close.

Weather conditions played a large part in the life of the pioneer. Not only did they affect his work and his disposition but also his looks. Antonia becomes quite mannish in her actions from working in the fields in all kinds of weather. Father Perrand is described in "Death Comes for the Archbishop" as looking rougher and older than his companions in Europe. Miss Cather explains that his rough appearance is due to the sharp winds which have so often bitten him on his long horse-back rides among the missions. He was head of a diocese in the vicinity of the

Great Lakes. Jean Marie Latour had been associated with him there for several years; and because he was well fitted for the position of Vicar Apostolic in New Mexico, Father Ferrand recommended him highly.

Father Latour was a brave, sensitive, courteous man, deeply intelligent, reflective, and generous. He invariably knew the correct thing to do in all situations, and he was never afraid to follow the dictates of his conscience. Inconvenience or unpleasantness for himself was not a detriment to his purpose.

Father Ferrand had realized the hardships of the position, and he knew that Father Latour was the ideal man for the place. He knew what the country would do to a missionary. He had told the Cardinal, "He will have no easy life...That country will drink up his strength and youth as it does the rain. He will be called upon for sacrifice, possibly martyrdom."<sup>29</sup> His picture was a true one. Father Latour and his Vicar, Father Vaillant, had no easy life, but they carried on the work of the church in a masterly way and learned to love the great Southwest better than their native France.

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<sup>29</sup> Cather, Willa, Death Comes for the Archbishop.  
p. 8.

In fact, when Archbishop Latour retired from active work, he had expected to spend his declining years in France, but there he found himself homesick for New Mexico. He had a feeling that old age did not lie so heavily on a man in the New World because of the light dry air and the fragrance of hot sun that created an illusion of youth.

Although "Death Comes for the Archbishop" lacks the appeal of the Nebraska novels, it shows the influence of the country upon the two missionaries, adding to their natural openness of character, tolerance, and generosity. The spiritual quality of the priests and the beauty of the landscape are never separate. The two men are always conscious of the desert, the mesas, and the changing sky, which seem to color and shape their lives.

#### CONCLUSION

This research indicates that Thomas Hardy felt intensely the effect of the heath and the moor upon the people of Wessex and that Willa Cather likewise was deeply conscious of the influence of the plains and the prairies upon the mid-western Americans. A modern historian, Schlesinger, has a point of view similar to that of the

two novelists:

That the geographic factor has played a large part in shaping the history of the American people no thoughtful person can deny....Man has been so noisy about the way he has "conquered Nature" and Nature has been so silent in her persistent influence over man, that the geographic factor in the equation of human development has been overlooked.<sup>30</sup>

Schlesinger says in part that man cannot be scientifically studied apart from his environment and that natural conditions had a formative influence on the character and outlook of the settlers in America. Pioneering developed sturdy individualism, impatience of restraint, impetuousness, and resourcefulness in action.<sup>31</sup>

Thomas Hardy and Willa Cather are similar, first, in their treatment of nature as if it were a person. The beginning pages of "The Return of the Native" indicate, more than any other passage from the Hardy novels, the author's feeling that the heath influences those who live on or near it and that it plays the part of a human being in its relationship with Wessex people.

The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank brooding to sleep, the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen....It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature--neither ghastly, hateful, ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning,

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<sup>30</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur Meier, New Viewpoints in American History. p. 23.  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

nor tame; but, like man slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.<sup>32</sup>

Ralli thinks that the heath plays the part of the chief character in the Hardy novels:

It is the heath itself that refines and exalts the emotions by previous effect upon the character of the vast dark spaces unresponsive to the moonlight, its loneliness, its steadfastness, its great age. Nature, when this world was young, fashioned these swarthy monotonies against time that should no longer be fair. Solitude, despair, brooding melancholy, are the human moods the Heath reflects and intensifies by its interaction with character.<sup>33</sup>

The prairie, like the heath, also plays the part of an actor in the human dramas that Miss Cather portrays. "The rich prairie land of Nebraska is one of the main characters and she treats it as such, giving only as much detail as is necessary to create an impression of reality."<sup>34</sup>

In speaking of Miss Cather's novel, "O Pioneers," Knight says:

For this novel she used the soil and the people of Nebraska and produced one of the greatest of stories dealing with the settlement of the mid-western region, a story of Alexandra Bergson's

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<sup>32</sup>Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. pp. 3-6.

<sup>33</sup>Ralli, Augustus, "The Heart of the Wessex Novels," North American Review, 217: 688.

<sup>34</sup>Blankenship, Russell, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind. p. 675.

heroic struggle with land as inimical, seemingly, and as fateful as Thomas Hardy's moors. Indeed, in the first chapter Miss Cather makes us feel hovering over Nebraska fields the same brooding, hostile destiny that played so large a part in the lives of the characters on Egdon Heath....Nor is Alexandra's battle only with soil and climate and stupidity; she must also make a valiant fight for youth and love. And since her stock was vigorous Anglo-Saxon instead of decadent Anglo-Saxon that came to grief in Hardy's novel she won--not without scars.<sup>35</sup>

The personification of the prairie in "O Pioneers" is very obvious. For example, as Alexandra commenced her return trip after visiting the river farms, and began to climb toward the Divide, she looked lovingly, radiantly, and yearningly about her at the country that seemed so strong and rich to her. "Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman."<sup>36</sup>

That Alexandra felt a personal security when she thought about nature is another indication that Miss Cather thought of nature as an almost human power of force. This force seemed at times a wild beast struggling against en-

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<sup>35</sup> Knight, Grant C., American Literature and Culture.  
p. 422.  
<sup>36</sup> Cather, Willa, O Pioneers. p. 65.



croachers. Like the heath, the prairie succeeded, time after time, in frustrating the efforts of human beings; but Miss Cather feels that, unlike the heath, the prairie has at last been conquered, and there are now only occasional and minor outbreaks.

The writings of Hardy and Cather are similar, second, in their exceptionally fine descriptive passages with nature as the subject. As truly accurate as Hardy's description of Egdon Heath in "The Return of the Native" is Miss Cather's description of the Nebraska prairies.

The following is Miss Cather's picture of spring and summer. One feels that her spirits rise then as Alexandra's did.

The wind blows from one week's end to another across that high, active, resolute stretch of country....The thick rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts. There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the sheer, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft deep sigh of happiness. The wheat-cutting sometimes goes on all night as well as all day, and in good seasons there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. The grain is so heavy that it bends toward the blades and cuts like velvet.

There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holds nothing back. Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and earth are curiously mated and intermingled.<sup>37</sup>

But winter brings a different mood to Miss Cather.

Her description of the cold season is reminiscent of Hardy.

Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season when Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep again between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring....It is like an iron country, and the spirit is oppressed by its rigor and melancholy.<sup>38</sup>

That both of these novelists use details about the country which give it meaning and significance in the lives of the people who live there is a third resemblance. They both weld character and environment together until the two become fused. They have been so successful that at times it is somewhat difficult to see the line of demarcation.

Take for example "A Lost Lady." Marian Forrester is painted for the reader with the most delicate touches. One realizes that the charm and beauty of the woman is far above the average. All the way through the book, one sees the character of Mrs. Forrester develop and change. Its

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<sup>37</sup>Cather, Willa, *O Pioneers*. pp. 76-77.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 187-188.

final degeneration comes when she descends to the level of the low-minded and unscrupulous.

But the book is more than a character delineation. The spirit of the Nebraska village of Sweetwater acts as a strong influence upon Mrs. Forrester. In a different environment she might not have become "a lost lady," for it is the uncongenial atmosphere, the prying, gossiping townspeople, and the village vulgarity that change her. Had she been able to absorb the great spirit of the prairie upon which she lived instead of the littleness of the town, "A Lost Lady" would have been a different story.

The fourth way in which Hardy and Cather resemble is in the use of localized realism. Hardy uses the section of England located in the southwestern part, south of the River Thames. Like Hardy, Miss Cather has been selective in her choice of background. She has for her settings the great American plain which stretches west of the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains, especially that section now called Nebraska.

The latter part of the nineteenth century, when the immigration was reaching Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado, is the time about which Miss Cather has chosen to write. She realized that that period had passed and that the

pioneers were no more. Yet they left their influence on the country just as the country left its imprint on them.

She is like Thomas Hardy in her localized realism and the use of nature as a factor in emotional crises. She paints her background in glowing colors when such are fitting, or in dull tones for the shadows of life.<sup>39</sup>

Miss Cather cares more for the past than the present. The vitality of the frontier and the ruggedness of the generation that broke virgin soil is passing, and in their place come standardization, desire for material comfort, and vulgarity.

The changing conditions are typified in "A Lost Lady." Marian passes from the possession of the heroic old captain to that of the ignoble Peters. This transition is comparable to the giving way of heroism, imagination, and elemental human qualities of the pioneer to the modern traits of pettiness and acquisitiveness.

With the passing of the pioneer in Miss Cather's novels, vanishes a folk endowed with imagination, resourcefulness, approval of convention, constructive power, and creative ability. In their place comes the second generation with its stupidity, cowardice, and indolence,

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<sup>39</sup> Marble, Annie Russell, A Study of the Modern Novel. p. 384.

saved only by the scholars and artists like Thea and Professor St. Peter, who have the vision and energy for working toward a goal as the pioneers did.

Hardy, however, writes about an England that has existed much longer than Miss Cather's America has. The conditions of life that the pioneers had to face were changing ones. Hardy's men and women needed the fortitude to face existing conditions of life that had not changed to any material degree for ages, and probably never would.

The untameable, Ishmaelitic thing that Egdon now was it had always been. Civilization was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation. In its venerable one coat lay a certain vein of satire on human vanity in clothes.<sup>40</sup>

Hardy's age-old heath is the setting for unchangeableness. The prairie has succumbed to the plow, but the heath seldom has. The paths across its face were worn centuries before and were still in use. The old Roman road, the remains of the Roman wall, and the barrows indicate great age. Long years without illusion through generation after generation have caused the Wessex peasants to view life as a thing to put up with. They did not

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<sup>40</sup>Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native. p. 6.

have the intense zest the pioneers in America had. Hardy's world is an ancient world, rich in tradition, where everything is centered in the earth and all the characters are modified by the earth. Cather presents a picture of a new country in a stage of transition, but the influence of that country upon its inhabitants is as strong as that of the heath.

A fifth resemblance between the two writers is that when the characters of either seek to control their environment without love for it, the result is usually frustration. Hardy's women are the ones who often fail, while his men are successful. Eustacia, Fanny, Grace, Tess--all are touched by tragedy, but Clym, Gabriel, Venn, and Donald Farfrae eventually receive their reward. In the Cather novels, however, the women succeed and the men are frustrated. Antonia, Alexandra, Thea, and "the hired girls" show temperament fusing with environment. Claude, Mr. Shimerda, Frank Shabata, and Carl illustrate the clash between the two.

Thus we see that the authors resemble in a sixth way: they both use women to show the influence of nature. Cather's women succeed because they adapt themselves to the prairie. Hardy's fail because they are unable to adapt

themselves to the heath.

The seventh and probably the most important similarity is in the way both novelists use nature as a developer of character. Such personality traits as self-reliance, independence, dignity, restraint, reticence, industry, courage, patience, adaptability, and resignation are common to the inhabitants of the heath and the prairie. Some of the characters in the novels of both writers develop because of their environment, but others are crushed because of the same environmental conditions, depending upon individual temperament.

A comparison of the novels points the way to the conclusion that the authors' similarity in treating nature as a personalized force, as vivid descriptive material, as a welder of character and environment, as realism, as the cause of frustration, and as a character-developer is due to their early training, their love of nature, their experiences on the heath and the prairie, their understanding of human nature, and their powers of observation.



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